Phryne

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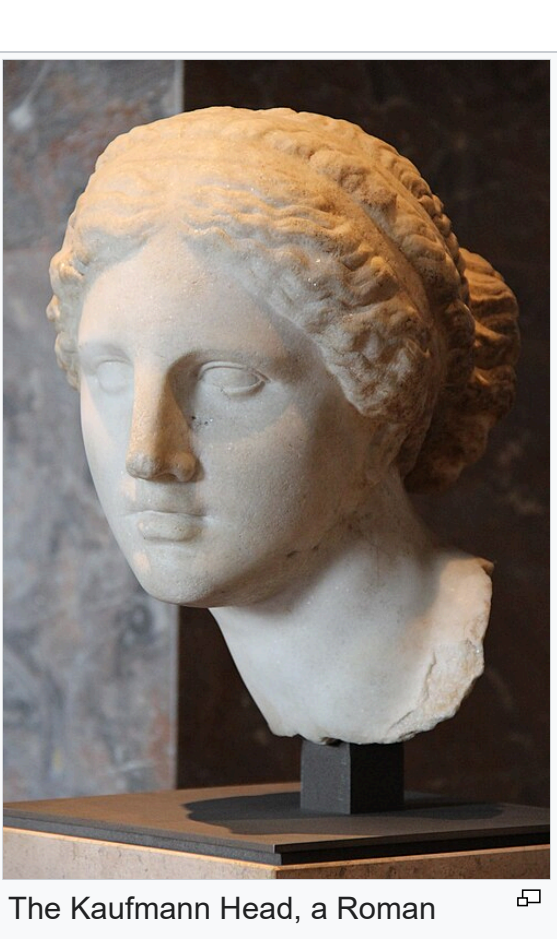
This article is about the ancient Greek courtesan. For other uses, see Phryne (disambiguation).


The Kaufmann Head, a Roman copy of the Aphrodite of Knidos, for which Phryne is said to have been the model, in the Musée du Louvre

Phryne (Ancient Greek: Φρύνη,[a] before 370 – after 316 BC) was an ancient Greek hetaira (courtesan). Born Mnesarete, she was from Thespiae in Boeotia, but seems to have lived most of her life in Athens. Apparently, she grew up poor but became one of the richest women in Greece.

Phryne is best known for her trial for impiety, in which she was defended by the orator Hypereides. According to legend, she was acquitted after baring her breasts to the jury, though the historical accuracy of this episode is doubtful. She also modeled for the artists Apelles and Praxiteles: the Aphrodite of Knidos was said to be based on her. Phryne was largely ignored during the Renaissance, but artistic interest in her began to grow from the end of the eighteenth century. Her trial was depicted by Jean-Léon Gérôme in the 1861 painting *Phryne Before the Areopagus*, which influenced many subsequent depictions of her, and according to Laura McClure made her an "international cultural icon".[1]

Sources [edit]

As with other ancient Greek women, scholarship about Phryne is hindered by the fragmentary nature of the surviving sources. Many of the surviving sources were written centuries after Phryne's own time, and they were written entirely by men.[2] The most substantial contemporary source about Phryne's life was Hypereides' defence speech from her trial. In the ancient world this was a major influence on Phryne's biographical tradition, but it is now lost, except for a few fragments.[3] The surviving ancient sources about Phryne are mostly from the Roman Empire, based on earlier Greek literature.[4] The most important of these is Athenaeus, who was from Roman Egypt in the second century AD. His *Deipnosophistae* ("The Scholars at Dinner") is the source of the vast majority of extant ancient writings about Phryne.[5] Other authors of the first, second and third centuries AD, including Plutarch, Pausanias, and Diogenes Laertius, also tell anecdotes about Phryne.[6]

Athenaeus' main source was fourth-century comic drama.[5] By the mid-fourth century BC, Athenian comic playwrights had moved away from the mythological subjects popular in earlier periods, and more often satirised real people.[7] Phryne featured in several of these plays. In Timocles' *Orestautokleides* and Anaxilas' *Neottis* she is named in lists of hetairai, Timocles' *Neaira* makes a joke about her early life, and Posidippus' *The Ephesian Girl* describes her trial. Two other plays, Antiphanes' *The Birth of Aphrodite* and Alexis' *The Woman from Knidos*, might have alluded to her association with the artists Apelles and Praxiteles.[8]

Life [edit]

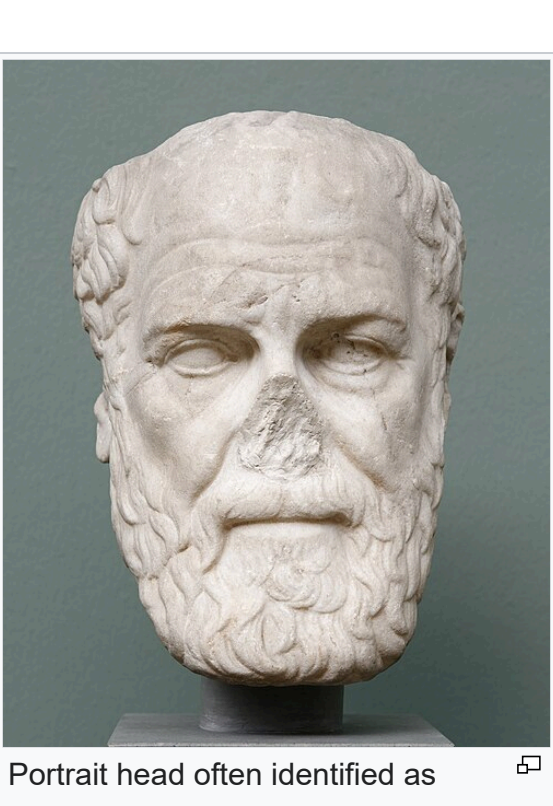
Very little is known about Phryne's life for certain. Ancient sources about her largely tell disjointed anecdotes which are difficult to piece together into a full biography,[9] and many of those stories may be invented.[10] Helen Morales writes that separating fact from fiction in accounts of Phryne's life is impossible.[10]

Phryne was from Thespiae in Boeotia.[11] She was probably born in the 370s BC,[b] and was the daughter of Epicles.[15] Both Plutarch and Athenaeus say that her real name was Mnesarete.[16][17] According to Plutarch she was called Phryne because she had a pale complexion like a toad (*phryne* in Greek).[16] She may also have been nicknamed Saperdion, Clausigelos, and Sestus.[c][15]

Phryne seems to have spent most of her life in Athens.[19] She might have come there with her family following the conquest of Thespiae by Thebes in 373 BC, been born in Athens to Thespian refugees following the Theban conquest, or been brought there as a girl to take part in the sex trade, as was Neaira, another fourth-century hetaira.[20][19] She apparently grew up poor – comic playwrights portray her picking capers[d] – and became one of the wealthiest women in the Greek world.[15] According to Callistratus, after Alexander razed Thebes in 335, Phryne offered to pay to rebuild the walls.[22] She was also said to have dedicated a statue of herself at Delphi, and a statue of Eros to Thespiae.[23] Phryne probably lived beyond 316 BC, when Thebes was rebuilt;[15] according to Plutarch her fame meant that she could continue to charge high fees to her clients in her old age.[24]

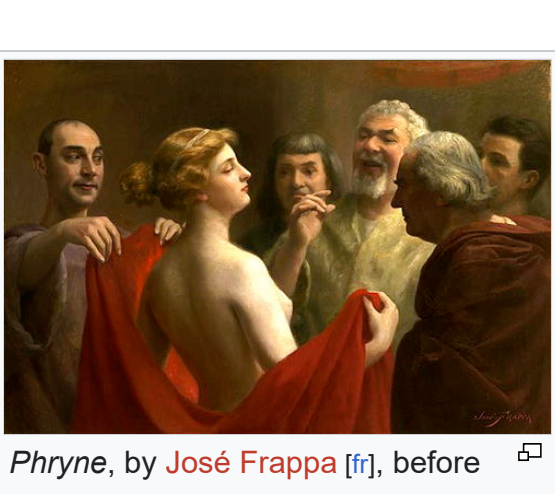
Hetairai had a reputation in ancient literature for their wit and learning.[25] The trope of the witty hetaira derives from the *Memoirs* of Lynceus of Samos, a comic author of the late fourth century BC, which contained several anecdotes about the wit of the hetaira Gnathaina.[26] Several anecdotes from the *Deipnosophistae* relate Phryne's witticisms,[25] though the meaning of many of them is unclear.[27]

Trial [edit]


Portrait head often identified as Hypereides. Copy of a late-4th or early 3rd-century BC Greek original.[28]

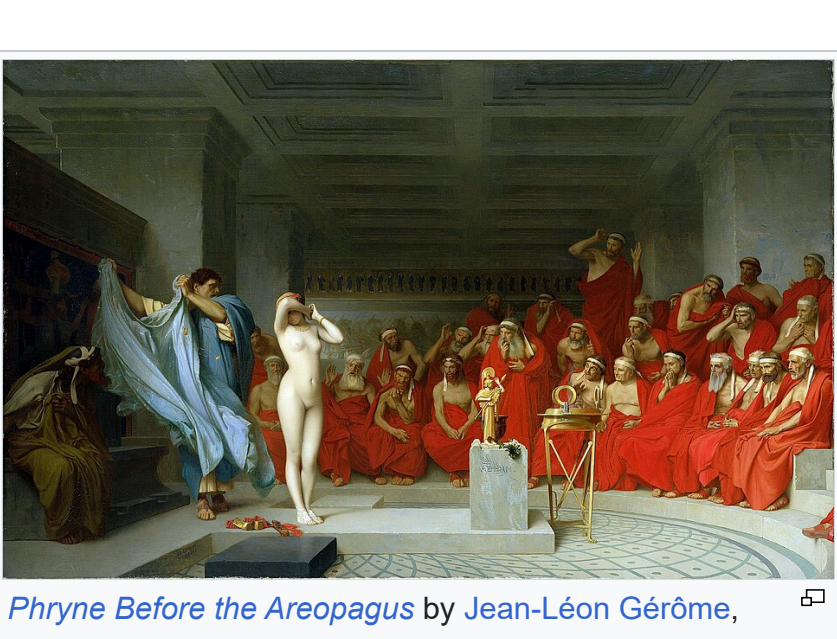
The most famous event in Phryne's life was the prosecution brought against her by Euthias.[15] Little is known of Euthias, except that he was supposedly a former lover of Phryne, and was accused of being a sycophant – a person who habitually brought prosecutions for personal gain.[29][30] The prosecution speech delivered by Euthias – which, according to Athenaeus, was composed by Anaximenes of Lampsacus on his behalf – does not survive.[31] Phryne was defended by Hypereides, a well-known and wealthy orator who had a reputation for licentiousness due to his association with hetairai. Six of the speeches attributed to him relate to hetairai, and in a surviving fragment of his defense of Phryne, he admits to being her lover.[32][31] Hypereides's defence speech survives only in fragments, though it was greatly admired in antiquity.[33] The date of the trial is uncertain.[34] If Anaximenes did compose the speech for the prosecution, it must have been before he moved to Macedon, and therefore was perhaps between 350 BC and 340 BC.[35] Alternatively, Craig Cooper argues that the trial was likely after the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC, while Eleanora Cavallini suggests that it was after 335 BC.[36]

Phryne was charged with *asebeia*, a kind of blasphemy. An anonymous treatise on rhetoric, which summarises the case against Phryne, lists three specific accusations against her – that she held a "shameless *komos*" or ritual procession, that she introduced a new god, and that she organised unlawful thiasoi or debauched meetings.[37] The charge of introducing a new god had previously been used in the trial of Socrates; that of organising thiasoi is also known from the trial of Ninos.[38] According to Harpocration, the new god introduced by Phryne was called Isodaites; though Harpocration describes him as being "foreign", the name is Greek[39] and other sources consider it an epithet of Dionysus, Helios, or Pluto.[40]


Phryne, by José Frappa [fr], before 1903

According to an ancient tradition, Euthias's case against Phryne was motivated by a personal quarrel rather than Phryne's alleged impiety.[41] Craig Cooper suggests that the trial of Phryne was politically motivated. He observes that Aristogeiton, to whom Athenaeus attributes a speech against Phryne, was a political enemy of Hypereides and prosecuted him for illegally introducing a decree after the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC.[42] Phryne's own provocative behaviour – for instance her offer to restore the walls of Thebes, on the condition that an inscription attributing the rebuilding to "Phryne the hetaira" be displayed – may also have partially motivated the prosecution. Konstantinos Kapparis suggests that the trial might have been seen as a response to "the uppity alien woman who did not know her place".[43]

Phryne was said to have been acquitted after the jury saw her bare breasts – Quintilian says that she was saved "not by Hypereides' pleading, but by the sight of her body".[44] Three different versions of this story survive. In Quintilian's account, along with those of Sextus Empiricus and Philodemus,[e] Phryne makes the decision to expose her own breasts; while in Athenaeus's version Hypereides exposes Phryne as the climax of his speech, and in Plutarch's version Hypereides exposes her because he saw that his speech had failed to persuade the jury.[45] Christine Mitchell Havelock notes that there is separate evidence for women being brought into the courtroom to arouse the sympathy of the jury, and that in ancient Greece baring the breasts was a gesture intended to arouse such a compassionate response, so Phryne's supposed behaviour in the court is not without parallel in Greek practice.[46] Ioannis Ziogas observes that it particularly recalls Clytemnestra's plea to Orestes in Aeschylus's play *The Libation Bearers*, and the story of Helen appealing to Menelaus for mercy after the fall of Troy.[47]


Phryne Before the Areopagus by Jean-Léon Gérôme, c. 1861

However, this episode probably never happened. It was not mentioned in Posidippus's version of the trial in his comedy *Ephesian Woman*, quoted by Athenaeus. *Ephesian Woman* was produced c. 290 BC, and the story of Phryne baring her breasts therefore probably postdates this.[48] In Posidippus's version, Phryne personally pleaded with each of the jurors at her trial for them to save her life, and it was this which secured her acquittal.[49] The story of Phryne baring her breasts may have been invented by the Hellenistic biographer Idomeneus of Lampsacus,[f][50] who wrote a treatise on Athenian demagogues.[51] Though all of the ancient accounts assume that Phryne was on trial for her life, *asebeia* was not necessarily punished by death; it was an *agōn timētos*, in which the jury would decide on the punishment if the accused was convicted.[52][g]

Phryne's trial is, along with those of Ninos and Theoris of Lemnos, one of three known from the fourth century in which a metic woman was accused of a religious crime. Due to her wealth and connections, hers was the only one in which the accused was acquitted.[53] A Hellenistic biographer, Hermippus of Smyrna, reports that after Phryne's acquittal, Euthias was so furious that he never spoke publicly again.[54] Kapparis suggests that in fact he was disenfranchised, possibly because he failed to gain one fifth of the jurors' votes and was unable to pay the subsequent fine.[55] The trial of Phryne also supposedly led to two new laws being passed governing courtroom behaviour: one forbade the accused being present while the jury considered their verdict; the other forbade lament in the courtroom.[56]

Model [edit]

Roman marble copy of Praxiteles' Aphrodite of Knidos, for which Phryne is named as a possible model

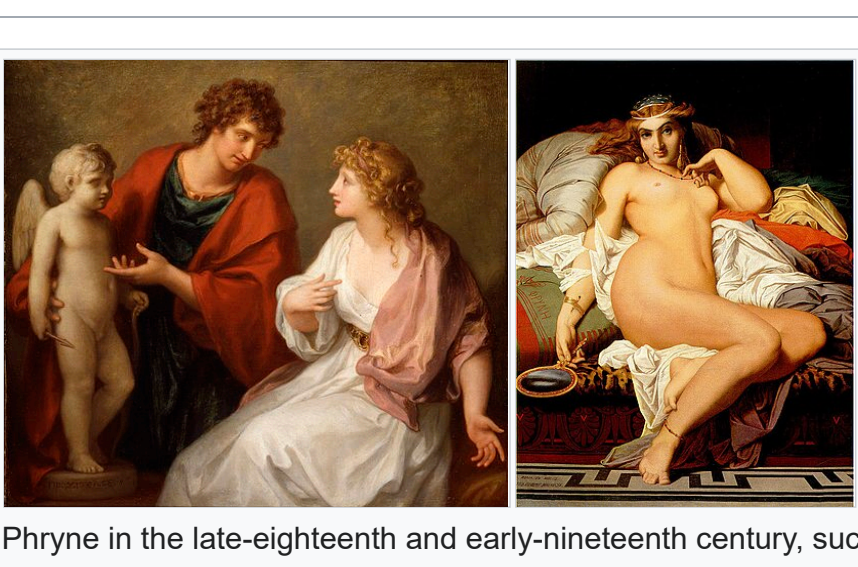
In ancient literature, hetairai were often said to have modelled for famous artists: for instance Aristides of Thebes was said to have painted Leontion.[57] Phryne was particularly associated with the sculptor Praxiteles,[58] and reputedly the model for both him and the painter Apelles.[59]

Phryne is most famously associated with Praxiteles' Aphrodite of Knidos,[60] the first three-dimensional and monumentally sized female nude in ancient Greek art.[61] However, the historicity of this association is doubtful.[62] The only source for the connection is Athenaeus. The sixth-century rhetorician Choricius of Gaza also says that Praxiteles used her as a model for a statue of Aphrodite, though according to him it was one commissioned by the Spartans.[63] It is not mentioned by other ancient authors who discuss both Phryne and the Aphrodite of Knidos, such as the first-century AD Roman author Pliny the Elder;[64] nor is the association mentioned in Pseudo-Lucian's extensive description of the Aphrodite of Knidos, or the eleven surviving ancient epigrams about the sculpture. In the second century, the theologian and philosopher Clement of Alexandria named the model not as Phryne but Cratina.[64]

Praxiteles also produced a golden or gilt statue of Phryne which was displayed – according to Pausanias dedicated by Phryne; according to Athenaeus by the Thespians[65] – in the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi.[66] This may have been the first female portrait ever dedicated at Delphi; it is the only known statue of a woman alone to be dedicated before the Roman period.[67] One of Praxiteles' sculptures of Eros was said to have been inspired by his desire for Phryne;[68] this was displayed in Thespiae alongside two other sculptures by Praxiteles, one of Aphrodite and one of Phryne herself.[69] According to Pliny, Phryne was also the model for Praxiteles' sculpture of a smiling courtesan,[70] which may have originally been displayed in Athens.[71]

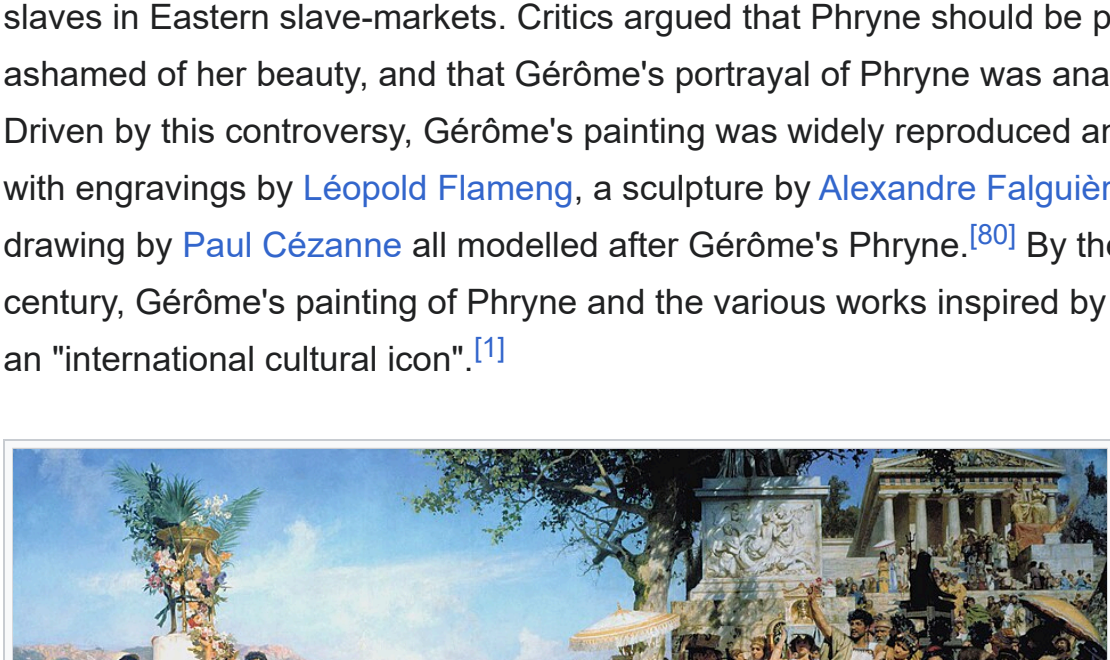
Like Praxiteles, Apelles used Phryne as a model for Aphrodite. According to Athenaeus, he was inspired by the sight of Phryne walking naked into the sea at Eleusis to use her as a model for his painting of Aphrodite Anadyomene (Aphrodite rising from the sea).[h] This was displayed at the sanctuary of Asclepius on the Greek island of Kos before being taken to Rome by the emperor Augustus; by the first century AD it appears to have been one of Apelles' best-known works.[73][72]

Reception [edit]


Depictions of Phryne in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, such as Angelica Kauffmann's *Praxiteles Giving Phryne his Statue of Cupid* (1794) avoid eroticising Phryne; paintings of the latter half of the nineteenth century such as Gustave Boulanger's *Phryne* (1850) eroticise and exoticise her.[74]

Phryne was largely ignored during the Renaissance, in favour of women such as Lucretia and Cleopatra, who were seen as heroic,[75] but interest in depicting her increased in the eighteenth century with the advent of Neoclassicism.[76] Early depictions of her by Angelica Kauffmann and J. M. W. Turner avoid eroticising her.[74] From the eighteenth century French artists focused on portraying Phryne as a courtesan, particularly depicting her public nudity at religious festivals or during her trial.[77] By the mid-nineteenth century artists such as Gustave Boulanger, rejecting the neoclassical aesthetic of Hellenism, painted Phryne without any reference to the ancient context as an eroticised and Orientalised nude.[78]

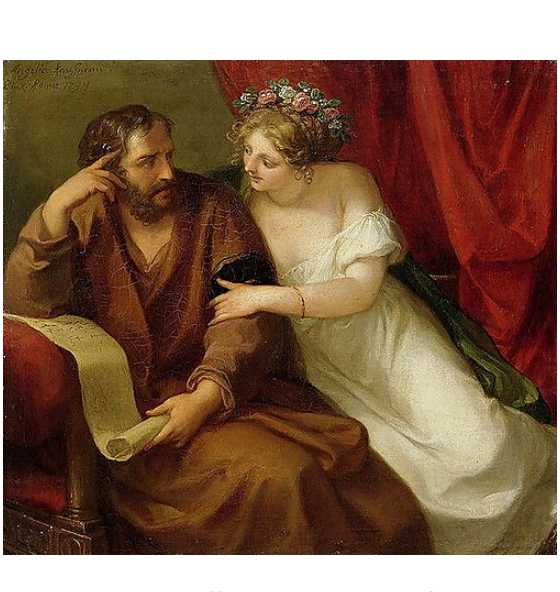
The most famous nineteenth century depiction of Phryne was Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Phryne Before the Areopagus*. This painting was controversial for showing Phryne covering her face in shame, in the same pose that Gérôme used in several paintings of slaves in Eastern slave-markets. Critics argued that Phryne should be proud rather than ashamed of her beauty, and that Gérôme's portrayal of Phryne was anachronistic.[79] Driven by this controversy, Gérôme's painting was widely reproduced and caricatured, with engravings by Léopold Flameng, a sculpture by Alexandre Falguière, and a drawing by Paul Cézanne all modelled after Gérôme's Phryne.[80] By the end of the century, Gérôme's painting of Phryne and the various works inspired by it had made her an "international cultural icon".[1]

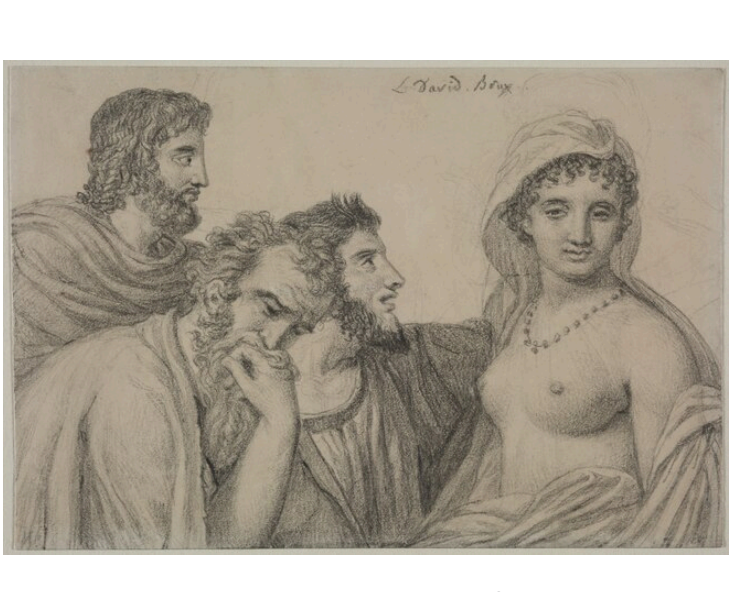

Henryk Siemiradzki, *Phryne at the Poseidonia in Eleusis*, 1889

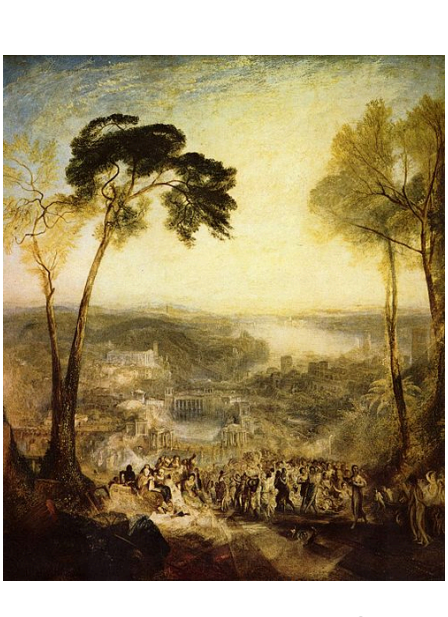
The story of Phryne bathing at Eleusis, which according to Athenaeus inspired Apelles to paint the Aphrodite Anadyomene, was also a subject for nineteenth century painters. In Britain, Frederic Leighton and Edward Burne-Jones both painted works on this theme in the 1880s, but the most famous nineteenth century painting of the subject was Henryk Siemiradzki's *Phryne at the Poseidonia in Eleusis*.[81]

In nineteenth century literature, Phryne appears in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and Rainer Maria Rilke. In Baudelaire's "Lesbos", from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, she is used metonymically to represent courtesans in general. In Rilke's "Die Flamingos", the flamingos are compared to Phryne, as they seduce themselves – by folding their wings over their own heads – more effectively than even she could ("they seem to think / themselves seductive; that their charms surpass / a Phryne's").[82][83] Late nineteenth-century depictions of Phryne in other media included a waltz by Antonin d'Argenton, a shadow-theatre production by Maurice Donnay – where the scene of Phryne's trial was modelled on Gérôme's painting – and a comic opera by Camille Saint-Saëns.[84]

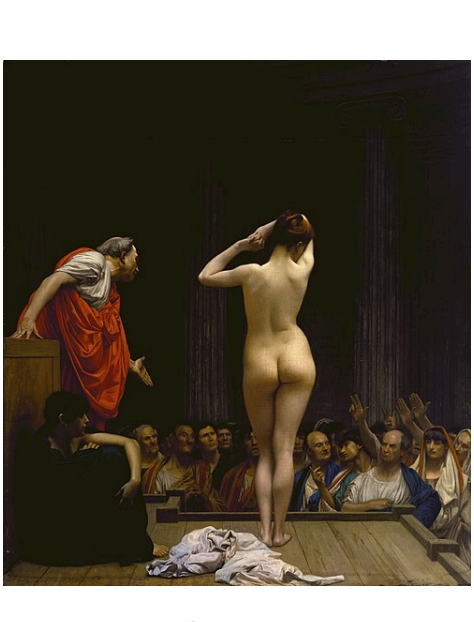
In the twentieth century, Phryne made the transition to cinema. Alessandro Blasetti's "Il processo di Frine" ("The Trial of Phryne") adapted the story of Phryne's trial with a contemporary setting, based on a short story by Edoardo Scarfoglio. The following year, the peplum film *Frine, cortigiana d'Oriente* ("Phryne, the Oriental Courtesan") was released. Both films depict Phryne's disrobing at her trial with an iconography influenced by Gérôme's painting.[85] A third Italian film, *La Venere di Cheronea* ("The Venus of Chaeronea"), focused on the story of the relationship between Phryne and Praxiteles.[86]

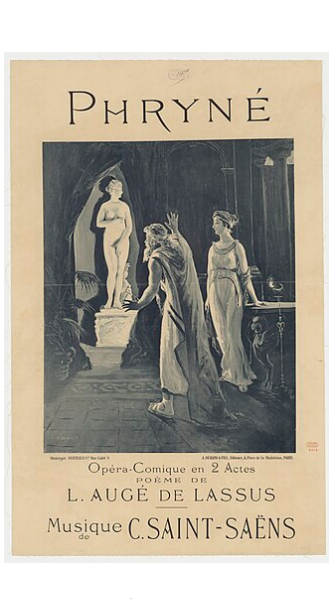

Angelica Kauffman, *Phryne Seduces the Philosopher Xenocrates* 1794


Jacques-Louis David, *Phryne Before the Judges* 1818


J.M.W. Turner, *Phryne Going to the Public Baths as Venus: Demosthenes Taunted by Aeschines* 1838

Marie-Christine Leroux as Phryne, photographed by Nadar for Gérôme's *Phryne Before the Areopagus* 1860–61


Jean Léon Gérôme, *A Roman Slave Market* 1884. One of Gérôme's slave-market paintings showing the slave in the same pose as Phryne.



Poster for the comic opera *Phryné* 1893, with music by Camille Saint-Saëns

Notes [edit]

a. ^ /ˈfraɪni/; Ancient Greek pronunciation: [pʰry.nɛː]

b. ^ Scholars have suggested birthdates for Phryne from the late 380s BC[12] to circa 370.[13] She was likely born before the conquest and subsequent destruction of Thespiae by Thebes in the late 370s.[14][12]

c. ^ According to Athenaeus there were two Phrynes: one was nicknamed Saperdion ("little fish"); the other Clausigelos ("teary laughter"). One of these bore the nickname Sestus ("fleecer"). He is not consistent in differentiating the two, and it is likely that there was in fact only one Phryne who was wrongly thought to be two people by later scholars.[18]

d. ^ Capers had so little value that only the very poor would gather them.[21]

e. ^ Philodemus, the earliest of these sources, lived in the first century BC, Quintilian in the first century AD, and Sextus Empiricus in the second century AD

f. ^ c. 350–270 BC

g. ^ The apparent contradiction between the assumption that Phryne was on trial for her life and the fact that the punishment for *asebeia* was not fixed has caused David Phillips to suggest that she was in fact tried under a different procedure, called *eisangelia*.[52]

h. ^ Alternatively, Pliny reports that Alexander the Great's mistress Campaspe was the model for Apelles' Aphrodite.[72]

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1. ^ a b McClure 2024, p. 17.
2. ^ McClure 2024, p. 20.
3. ^ McClure 2024, p. 22.
4. ^ Funke 2024, p. 3–4.
5. ^ a b Funke 2024, p. 15.
6. ^ McClure 2024, p. 24.
7. ^ Funke 2024, p. 42–43.
8. ^ Funke 2024, pp. 43–48.
9. ^ McClure 2024, p. 18.
10. ^ a b Morales 2011, p. 72.
11. ^ Eidinow 2016, p. 64.
12. ^ a b McClure 2024, p. 90.
13. ^ Kapparis 2018, p. 439.
14. ^ Funke 2024, p. 29.
15. ^ a b c d e McClure 2014, p. 127.
16. ^ a b Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis* 14 (*Moralia* 401A).
17. ^ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 13.60 = 13.591e, citing Aristogeiton's speech against Phryne.
18. ^ McClure 2014, pp. 127, 196.
19. ^ a b Kapparis 2018, p. 440.
20. ^ Funke 2024, pp. 29–30.
21. ^ Dalby 1996, p. 25.
22. ^ Davidson 1997, p. 106.
23. ^ Kapparis 2018, pp. 321–323.
24. ^ Funke 2022.
25. ^ a b McClure 2014, p. 55.
26. ^ Funke 2024, p. 11.
27. ^ McClure 2024, p. 77.
28. ^ Richter 1984, p. 150–151.
29. ^ McClure 2024, p. 142.
30. ^ MacDowell 2012.
31. ^ a b McClure 2024, p. 143.
32. ^ Funke 2024, pp. 84.
33. ^ Eidinow 2016, p. 24.
34. ^ Cooper 2001, p. 147.
35. ^ Eidinow 2016, p. 23.
36. ^ Cavallini 2008, p. 207.
37. ^ Eidinow 2016, pp. 26–7.
38. ^ Funke 2024, pp. 87–90.
39. ^ Eidinow 2016, p. 29.
40. ^ Versnel 1990, p. 119.
41. ^ O'Connell 2013, p. 113.
42. ^ Cooper 1995, p. 306, n. 10.
43. ^ Kapparis 2021, pp. 80–81.
44. ^ Morales 2011, p. 78.
45. ^ Morales 2011, pp. 76–7.
46. ^ Havelock 1995, p. 45.
47. ^ Ziogas 2018, pp. 81–82.
48. ^ Eidinow 2016, pp. 24–5.
49. ^ Kapparis 2018, p. 259.
50. ^ Cooper 1995, p. 315.
51. ^ Cooper 1995, p. 307.
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53. ^ Kennedy 2014, pp. 145–148.
54. ^ *FGrH* 1026 F 46a, in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 13.59 = 13.590d.
55. ^ Kapparis 2018, p. 261, n. 332.
56. ^ Funke 2024, p. 80.
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58. ^ McClure 2024, p. 97.
59. ^ McClure 2024, p. 19.
60. ^ Funke 2024, p. 51.
61. ^ Havelock 1995, p. 9.
62. ^ McClure 2024, p. 121.
63. ^ McClure 2024, p. 172, n.2.
64. ^ a b Funke 2024, pp. 67, 158, n.53.
65. ^ Funke 2024, pp. 70–71.
66. ^ Keesling 2006, pp. 66–7.
67. ^ Keesling 2006, p. 67.
68. ^ Funke 2024, p. 56.
69. ^ Funke 2024, p. 60.
70. ^ Funke 2024, p. 70.
71. ^ McClure 2024, pp. 92–93.
72. ^ a b McClure 2024, p. 114.
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74. ^ a b Cavallini 2008, pp. 210–211.
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76. ^ Funke 2024, p. 106.
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78. ^ McClure 2024, p. 9.
79. ^ Ryan 1993, pp. 1134–1135.
80. ^ Ryan 1993, pp. 1135–1136.
81. ^ McClure 2024, p. 14.
82. ^ Ryan 1993, pp. 1130–1131.
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